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Sexual Psychology in Theodore Sturgeon's Fiction

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Abstract

Many critics have mentioned the importance of Theodore Sturgeon to the history of science fiction, but his work has not received enough academic critical attention. One probable reason for the praise Sturgeon's work receives, especially from fellow writers, is his candid portrayal of the psychology of male sexual desire. Sturgeon focuses on three specific aspects of male sexuality: the sexual charge of being needed by a woman, the overwhelming power of male sexual urges, and the importance of chance encounters to create the spark igniting a sexual conflagration in men. Sturgeon's candor about how male sexual desires feel sets him apart from his contemporaries and provides a major reason for the appreciation he receives as a writer.

Theodore Sturgeon's name is one of those most cited in lists of the writers of science fiction's "Golden Age." Many consider him the best "Golden Age" author, mainly because he concentrated less on scientific hardware and more on character interaction than did his contemporaries. A moralistic and romantic writer, his major themes were tolerance for otherness of all kinds and concern that many social problems were results of repressed sexuality. He was among the first American science fiction writers to write plausibly about sex, homosexuality, race, and religion. Because of this, he has sometimes been accused of writing pornography by those who prefer their science fiction in the standard starched-collar puritan mode. In reality, Sturgeon is among the first to turn American science fiction into a fiction for mature, thinking adults, as his influence on writers including Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, and Samuel Delany attests.

Indeed, the praise for Sturgeon's writing is directly proportional to the lack of critical attention paid to his writing. Probably no author so highly regarded has received so little genuine critical assessment. The praise is often effusive, and mostly coming from fellow science-fiction writers. Norman Spinrad(1990) says of Sturgeon that he is "probably the finest short story writer the SF genre has produced, and arguably the finest American short story writer of the post-World War II era" (p. 167). Encomiums nearly this strong have come from Robert Heinlein, Harlan Ellison, and Samuel Delany. Others, such as Brian Aldiss and Barry Malzberg, though not as wowed with Sturgeon's style, still admit that Sturgeon is essential to understanding the development of science fiction.

What is there precisely in Sturgeon's writing that garners him such praise and loyalty from other writers in the science fiction field? A key to answering this question may be in the way Sturgeon handles characters, especially male characters. Even when Sturgeon's characters fit the stereotypes of the markets in which he published, there was usually some dimension beyond the stereotypes, something that made the characters seem like real people and not idealized or cartoon people. Brian Aldiss(1988) has noted

Sturgeon's concern for the underdog, and in particular his rejection of "the dangerous cult of the superman" (p. 226). Aldiss notes Sturgeon's "interest in the psychology and oddity of human beings" (p. 219), but Sturgeon's peculiar interest is in the odd psychology of human beings.

An example of this interest in odd psychology is in the way Sturgeon writes about male psychology. Sturgeon's presentation of sex through the psychology of sex sets him apart from other science-fiction writers of his generation. Sturgeon avoids the "peek-a-boo" prurience of many lesser authors. Other writers of his time often write around the subject even when they try to write about it. Sturgeon also usually avoids the moralizing lecture approach to the subject that Heinlein mistakes for honesty about sex. When Sturgeon writes about sex, he often appears not to be, because titillation, mechanics, and conventional morality in sexual matters do not interest him as a writer. Sturgeon's subject is the perception and feeling of the man whose mind has been taken over by the sexual imperative.

A running theme in his fiction involves men who find themselves needed by women. Sturgeon twists the "damsel in distress" scenario a little because in his fiction the woman is not the prize. Instead, the psychological driver is being needed. Sturgeon realizes what a potent sexual stimulus being needed by a woman can be. One sees this in "Ghost of a Chance" (1943), in which a man feels compelled to help a woman he has never before met because she proclaims that "something" is after her. She slaps him when he tries to help, and this brings upon him a terrible fascination with her. After a second, humorously painful encounter with her, Gus the protagonist and narrator is hooked. He finds her and finding her cements the sexual bond between them. The driving force for this modern mating dance is that a jealous ghost is smitten with her and attacks any man with whom she becomes even remotely close. Of course, the ghost does terrible things to Gus before he finally figures out how to get rid of it. The question for the reader is this: what drives Gus to emotional extreme and nearly total devotion to a woman with whom he has had only a few brief conversations? It is that he thinks he can do something for her and makes himself determined to do it.

Writing for a popular magazine in the 1940s, Sturgeon could in "Ghost of a Chance" bring the reader only up to a quick view of this aspect of male sexual psychology. Ten years later, Sturgeon had much more room to give the reader a good, hard look at it. In "Bright Segment" (1955), Sturgeon takes a much more graphic and physical approach to this concern. In this story, Sturgeon makes explicit the psychological power of being needed. However, he removes most of the popular fiction-writing encumbrances that prevented a full view of it in "Ghost of a Chance." In "Bright Segment," the protagonist is like Gus a man of limited intelligence and no obvious sexual appeal. However, while Gus was just a kind of normal guy, the unnamed protagonist of "Bright Segment" is mentally retarded and physically repulsive, being called an "orangutan." Like Gus, he encounters an unknown woman in distress late at night. Unlike Iola's problem in "Ghost of a Chance," this woman's problem is neither at a remove nor supernatural – she has been wounded in a mob deal gone badly wrong.

The major and important difference in "Bright Segment" is how this reduction to fundamentals brings out hitherto unknown dimensions to the psychology of male need. Slashed with a razor from groin to throat and dumped out of a car, the woman is insensible and dying when the protagonist first finds her. Sturgeon in this story ups the stakes in terms of desperation, but also carefully avoids explaining the context for what is going on. This has much to do with the protagonist, whose limited intelligence means that he can fix his mind to only one thing at a time.

For the first part of the story, the reader is left bewildered as to what precisely the protagonist is doing with this bleeding woman. Did he attack her? Is he trying to hide the body? After he dumps her onto the bed, is he going to do something perverse? The limited third person point of view works against the reader, who is desperate to find motivation for this man. Yet, it turns out that none of the above questions is true. Instead, this man's limited intelligence presents a different sort of motivation. He is desperate to be needed, a point driven home several times in the story. He sees in this woman's situation an opportunity to do the only thing he knows how to do well: "fix it right." So, he sets out not to abuse the woman, but using nothing other than his handyman skills and the tools in his apartment, to operate on her and save her life.

Sturgeon has freed the issue of "need" from the sexuality of the character, and thus it more intimately reflects on the sexuality of the male reader. That sex is not a motivation for this man is made clear when weeks after the operation, the recuperating woman offers him sex as a "thank you" only to be firmly rejected. His pleasure is not in being wanted, but in being needed. This difference gets revealed late in the story, so that in the earlier parts, the reader fills in what would seem to be "normal" motivation. This technique is particularly strong in the beginning of the story, which describes the operation in quite some detail. The protagonist must undress the woman, must cut away the brassiere and silken panties, must work up close for quite a long time at the open wound in her groin. Sturgeon has brought the matter to the level of touch in this story; whereas, in "Ghost of a Chance" the two principle characters interact mostly through the more distant sense of sight.

Through the remainder of "Bright Segment" Sturgeon continues to provide a sexualized scenario without the sex. The woman lies in bed for most of the story, utterly reliant upon the protagonist. For most of the story, she cannot speak. She is captive to his need, yet his need is being needed. In a sense, he has sublimated sexual feelings into being helpful, and attaches to being helpful all the usual secondary emotions normally attached to sex, such as pride and jealousy. This is why at the end of the story, when the woman is well again and prepared to leave, the protagonist strikes her head with an iron. The entire emotional life of this animal-man centers on his ability to "fix it right," and he will not lose his one chance to do it. By detaching sex from the male urge to be needed by a woman, the story draws attention to just how really sexual the need to be needed normally is.

Elements similar to those in "Bright Segment" appear in the story "The Pod in the Barrier" (1957). As in "Bright Segment," a man whose life is fixing things finds himself by

helping a woman in need. Just as the “fix-it man” in “Bright Segment” is called an “orangutan,” Nils Blum in “The Pod in the Barrier” is called a “monkey.” The story itself involves the crew of a spaceship sent on a suicide mission to break through a deadly barrier surrounding an important segment of space. Four of the crew members are selected experts, one of whom tells the story. The rest of the crew are the ship’s captain, the “utility monkey” Blum, and the “crew’s girl” or CG, Virginia. The CG’s job is to fulfill the sexual needs of the male crews of spaceships, but Virginia is an “unemployed” CG because she is so ugly and has such a distasteful personality that none of the crew wants to “employ” her. The secret in the plot is that Virginia is in fact the only person in the crew who is there to do the job of breaking through the barrier, and even she does not know this. Her psychological state of constant self-doubt and her ability to generate such doubt in others are the key to getting past the barrier. The “experts” are in fact decoys, unbeknownst to them, there to show Virginia that her doubt-field psychic ability works. The mission becomes threatened, however, when the two misfits, the “monkey” and the “unemployed” CG, find comfort in each other’s company, so that the captain must bully and abuse Blum to ensure the mission.

“The Pod in the Barrier” displays a consistent theme in Sturgeon’s fiction. Sturgeon has no interest in love between the “beautiful” people. The two who find love in this story are the lowest of the crew members, constantly degraded, insulted, and abused by those who assume they are “better.” Sturgeon humanizes the deformed, crippled, and disregarded, often by having them join in finding in each other a way to break the loneliness of their existence. Indeed, this joining of the lonely is the entire rationale of the story “Saucer of Loneliness” (1953), in which a flying saucer turns out to be a message in a bottle to the loneliest person on Earth, a message that then unites her with a lonely deformed man. “The Pod in the Barrier” follows the same pattern of joining a physically deformed man with a psychologically deformed woman to comfort each other in an expressly non-sexual way. Indeed, just as the woman in “Bright Segment” offers herself sexually to the man helping her, so Virginia offers herself to Blum. And as in “Bright Segment,” the man refuses the offer of sex. His love for Virginia is not in the sex, but in the way that his love can help her “believe” in something.

In stories such as “The Pod in the Barrier” and “Saucer of Loneliness,” Sturgeon writes about a common social phenomenon in which the disabled are socially pushed to engage sexually only with other disabled people. Research into the attitudes of the American public shows that this social pressure is both prevalent and strong. One disabled participant reported that his or her parents repeatedly encouraged sexual relationships only with other disabled people (Esmail, et al., 2010, p. 1151). The study found that the general public has a widespread misbelief that disability negatively affects sexuality, often to the extent that disabled people are seen as asexual, even though in reality most disabled people are sexually normal. These pressures and misbeliefs often have greater negative effect on the sexuality of disabled people than the disabilities do, sometimes leading disabled people to internalize the perception of asexuality (Esmail, et al., 2010, p.1151). Sturgeon’s stories that center on the sexuality of disabled people demonstrate these phenomena. The disabled seek each other, feeling rejected and

disregarded by society at large. The pressures drive characters to turn what would be an ordinary sexual relationship into an asexual one that the characters think of as better than a sexual relationship would be, such as companionship, aid, or comfort.

Nevertheless, despite this elevation of male-female love from sex to companionship, the sexuality of the relationship never entirely goes away. The point seems to be that while sex is part of the companionship between the lonely characters, it is not the principle reason for it. The couple do not join for the sex. Instead, the sex is left to the reader's imagination as a logical complement to or expression of the love derived from true companionship. The attitude toward sex that Sturgeon displays in some of his stories is driven in the way that Sturgeon animalizes the characters, especially the male ones. The typical method of animalizing a human character is to reduce the character to primal urges, all sex and aggression. In "The Pod in the Barrier" and "Saucer of Loneliness," however, the educated, superior people who consider themselves to be civilized are the ones who act grossly abusive and sexual, while the characters described as animals in physical terms are those who arrive at the most developed and civilized forms of human relationship. In a sense, in Sturgeon's world Hyde is the civilized character and Jekyll the depraved one.

However, Sturgeon does not always sublimate the sexual urge as he does in "The Pod in the Barrier" or "Saucer of Loneliness." The sexual urge remains a very strong part of the lives of many of his characters, even overwhelmingly strong. Two of Sturgeon's primary methods for demonstrating this understanding of male sex drives derive from the way he uses chance encounters between men and women and the way that men often struggle to redirect their sexual urges.

Chance encounters rank very highly in Sturgeon's fictional worlds. Chance encounters often produce the emotional energy motivating the characters. Unexpected meetings have the strongest sexual charge in his stories. In the early stories, when publishing in popular American magazines meant withholding the more obvious sexual behaviors, Sturgeon would resort to marriage as the substitute for sex. Thus, in "Ghost of a Chance," a woman in panic from an unseen assailant runs into a man on an empty city street at 3 am. What either of them is doing there at that time is irrelevant. The encounter is all that matters, a fleeting moment that drives the narrator into a sexual frenzy of such ferocity that he willingly suffers extreme torment from a ghost so that he can "marry" the woman at the story's end. The woman is perhaps equally turned on by this encounter, as she admits to falling in love with the man after only four dates. A very similar scenario happens in "Blabbermouth" (1946), in which a young radio host and lothario bumps into a woman who turns out to be someone he had once dated in high school. So impassioned is Eddie Gretchen with Maria Undergaard that he immediately breaks a date to have lunch with her. Like Gus in "Ghost of a Chance," the narrator becomes overwhelmed with desire and obsessed with a woman he hardly knows. As in "Ghost of a Chance," marriage comes about after only four dates. As in "Ghost of a Chance," the woman's sexuality is represented in her quick acquiescence to both dating and marriage despite her fear that her particular talent, in this case being possessed by a poltergeist that drives her to reveal people's secrets, will potentially harm her new lover.

The novel *Godbody* (1986) pushes the sexual energy of chance encounter in a different direction. In this case, a minister in a sexually repressed marriage spies a naked man and stops his car to talk to him. The naked man is Godbody, a kind of Jesus figure turned hippie guru of free love. One touch from Godbody reveals to Dan Currier his “true” self, and so overwhelmed is he by sexual desire that he races home to have nearly violent, uninhibited sex with his wife for the first time in their marriage. This sex cements their marriage because the two must *reveal* themselves, in several senses of the word, to each other. Their sex life before had been conventional, circumspect, and as passionless as they could make it, both believing that this is how a minister and his wife should behave. A reviewer of Sturgeon’s writing career can see that in later decades when the “acceptable” boundaries of publishing had been extensively widened, Sturgeon could more clearly express his idea that chance encounter provides the greatest instant sexual charge.

Sturgeon’s fiction repeatedly demonstrates, as shown above, the extreme intensity of human male sexual desire. In earlier stories, these demonstrations had to be veiled or sidestepped, alluded to without explication. By the 1960s, such delicacy was dispensable. The theme steps fully out in the open in Sturgeon’s *Star Trek* script “Amok Time” (1967). In this story, the famously reserved and emotionless humanoid Vulcan Spock undergoes an extreme biochemical transformation. Adult male Vulcans periodically get overwhelmed by a powerful sex drive that will kill them unless they find their correct mates or vanquish a rival male in combat. Spock becomes irritable and aggressive, flinging his food, shouting angry displays, and hiding in his quarters. He says that this *ponfarr* condition “strips our minds from us” and that “it brings a madness which rips away our veneer of civilization.” At the height of this sexual tumult, Spock declares that he is “burning,” one of several references to “heat” throughout the story, perhaps hiding a joke about Spock’s being “in heat,” but certainly drawing attention to the “burning desire” metaphor commonly referring to young love.

Sturgeon’s fiction about sex deals primarily with heterosexual male sexual desire. Although he has written from female points of view and has written sympathetically about homosexuality, his central perspective is male and heterosexual. In fact, female sexuality seems to be a mystery to Sturgeon. Women are stimuli for male psycho-sexual transformation, the spark that ignites the flame. This is not to say that Sturgeon caricatures women as vamps and vixens. More often, they are victims who favorably respond to male bravado done on their behalf. Women also direct and mollify male sexual energies. For instance, the demur Melissa Franck in *Godbody* manages to tame and correct the twisted sexuality of Hobo Wellen, who can get an erection only through conquest or rape. Women in Sturgeon’s world also remain much less at the mercy of their sexual desires. T’Pring, Spock’s arranged bride in “Amok Time” desires a different man, Stonn, but coolly manages to take Spock out of the arrangement by having him battle his own friend for her rather than her true chosen lover. The reader or viewer, though, never really gets inside women’s sexual experience in Sturgeon’s fiction, not in the way that the reader fully experiences the male’s experience. Female sexuality remains a curiosity, the

most curious aspect being what motivates it. Really, Sturgeon's portrayal of female sexuality is a view through the perspective of the sexually charged male protagonists.

Perhaps what makes Sturgeon so respected as a writer is his honest presentation of how male sexuality feels. It is quite an accomplishment in writing, akin to Hemingway's candid revelation of male psychological pain from the inside. Sturgeon presents the world as men in the grip of sexual passion experience it. The fantastic and exaggerated elements in the fiction are realistic depictions of the perceptual distortions in minds removed from their civilized equanimity by primal forces beyond their control. Sturgeon's psychological realism, more than the science-fictional or fantastic ideas in which it is wrapped, is what grips appreciative readers of his work.

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